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ABSTRACT

A discussion of techniques for assisting native English-speaking students in understanding the concept of gender in such languages as French, German, Italian, and Spanish considers three issues: (1) What is gender? (2) What is a good way to learn the gender of nouns? and (3) How did the concept of gender develop and how can the concept help one to deal with gender more effectively? It is noted that gender in languages refers less to sex than to categories or species and in English the neuter category predominates while in Romance languages it does not exist. Students are entreated to avoid ascribing sex-associated characteristics to nouns of either gender, but to rely on grammatical rules governing gender. However, a theory of the development of the gender concept that ties gender to the animistic personification of things and ideas is proposed. It is suggested that in learning Romance languages, students be encouraged to relate gender to the absence or presence of certain letters at the end of the noun, with the understanding that some inconsistencies exist even in this system. (MSE)

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SOME NEW WAYS TO TEACH GENDER

One of the greatest difficulties for native speakers of English studying a foreign language, particularly a Western European foreign language such as French, German, Italian or Spanish is the concept of gender. In French, Italian and Spanish, every noun is either masculine or feminine. In German, nouns may be masculine, feminine or neuter, but the distribution of these categories is not always logical to a native speaker of English. This paper will explain the concept of gender as it applies to some of the above mentioned languages and propose two techniques available to the student to help him assimilate enough of the concept of gender to be able to use it with confidence. It is particularly recommended that this paper be copied and distributed to students who have difficulty grasping the intricacies of gender.

We will consider three issues in this paper. First, what is gender? Second, what is a good way to learn the gender of nouns in foreign languages? Third, how did the concept of gender develop and how can that concept help us deal with gender more effectively?

As soon as a native speaker of English hears that all nouns in the Romance languages are either masculine or feminine, he begins to feel, if not an antipathy towards them, at least a feeling that these languages are too far removed from logic to be comprehensible. How can a door be

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feminine? How can a book be masculine? A masculine boy, yes...and a feminine girl, those categories pose no problems. One may even say that a cow is feminine and a stallion is masculine, and not be considered insane. But to extend sex to inanimate objects is going too far. How can an otherwise well-adjusted person look at a chair and call it feminine, or say that a bench is masculine? And yet that is what one does in the Romance languages.

Answer: Although the word "gender" in English generally refers to the word "sex," the word "gender" has a special meaning in the vocabulary of the professional linguist-grammarian. First, it does not necessarily refer to sex. In certain non-European languages, nouns have gender which are not referred to as masculine and feminine. Originally, the word "gender" has more to do with the words "category," "type," "species," "kind." It just so happened, however, for reasons which will be explained later, that English has evolved to a system with three categories, and that in those categories, neuter predominates, while masculine and feminine gender are assigned strictly to nouns which denote masculine and feminine beings (mostly humans). In the Romance languages, however, there is no neuter gender. It was lost centuries ago. Of course all nouns referring to masculine beings have masculine gender; all nouns referring to feminine beings have feminine gender; but nouns which in English would have neuter gender have either masculine or feminine gender in the Romance languages.

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These objects are not perceived as being feminine or masculine; they are perceived as having no sexual characteristics. But when referring to them, one does use an article or an adjective which characterizes it as belonging to either group one or group two, the feminine group or the masculine group. More on this later. Suffice it to say that gender, in non-English languages, when we are discussing inanimate objects, has nothing to do with sex. It simply appears to have something to do with sex to the native speaker of English.

What is a good way to learn the gender of nouns in the Romance languages? This is an important question for as soon as one begins to speak sentences consisting of more than two or three words, the question of gender must be dealt with. Answer: In French, most nouns which end in "e" are feminine. This general rule holds water about 75% of the time. All other nouns are masculine. In addition, most nouns ending in "ion" are feminine. There are many exceptions to this rule, but it will suffice for the person who has just begun to study French. In Spanish and Italian, any noun that ends in "-a" is generally feminine. Other nouns are generally masculine. Words ending in "cion" in Spanish and "-ione" in Italian are generally feminine. The key to determining whether a noun is masculine or feminine is to look at the word itself; the gender is contained in the ending, the suffix, of the word. Many Americans make the mistake of associating masculine characteristics with

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masculine words, or feminine characteristics with feminine words. But the key is in the ENDING of the word itself, and no where else. Thus it is that French "barbe" (Spanish "barba") which means "beard" in English, is feminine, because it ends in "e" in French and "a" in Spanish, while French "sein" (Spanish "seno") which means "breast" is masculine because it lacks the feminine final "e" (or "a" in Spanish). Admittedly, the native speaker of English will have difficulty with this concept initially, because of a cultural bias which links the word "beard" with masculinity and "breast" with femininity. But gender, as a grammatical concept, has nothing to do with sex; hence, the native speaker of English must look to the grammatical rules that govern gender, not his own conception of what is feminine and masculine, which is based on his experience as an English speaker.

Concept number three is "how did the concept of gender develop, and how can understanding that concept help us deal with gender better?" No foreign language textbook written within recent memory considers this issue; the ideas expressed here cannot be proven in this short space. But by considering anthropology, mythology and a little history and psychology, one can deduce what might have happened to create gender, and at the same time, create a system which will help us accept some of the ideas already developed in preceding paragraphs.

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Let us forget, for a moment, about the language we are now attempting to learn, be it French, German, Italian or Spanish. As we know, centuries and millennia ago, humans were polytheistic, believers of many gods. We have all heard of the Greek gods, Zeus, Juno, Apollo, Hermes, Aphrodite, Athena, etc., and possibly of other divinities, Baal, Ashtoreth, Woden, Thor, Amon, Isis, Ptah, Quetzalcoatl, etc. But in addition to these gods, man used to believe that there were many, many supernatural beings. The universe was alive with beings, and every thing had a god or a goddess associated with it. As civilized as the Romans were, they nevertheless erected a statue to a goddess, depicting her as blind-folded, named Fortune. Victory was a goddess with outstretched wings. Every thing, even abstractions, called to mind some personification. It is interesting to note that these personifications were generally seen, not as asexual beings, but as masculine or feminine personalities. The object and the god or goddess associated with it, in some cases came to be fused together, and to speak of Fortune could mean either the abstraction of fortune or the goddess Fortune. To speak of the sun or the moon could mean to speak of the objects themselves, as we conceive of them nowadays, or to speak of their patron divinity. It may be difficult for us to think of a chair or a table as having a goddess associated with it, but most of us understand that a lovely lady was carved on a ship's prow, and are not offended when we hear an ocean-going

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vessel referred to as "she." "She's a seaworthy ship," they say. Many heavy construction workers refer to their very large and heavy pieces of equipment as "she" and "her." Speaking of a construction beam, a foreman may say to the crane operator, "Bring 'er on up!"

Let us keep in mind that we are only hypothesizing. But let us also remember that in the vast majority of cases, both in modern speech and in the language of pre-historic man, reference to things or abstractions in terms of masculinity and femininity probably became more and more meaningless with the passage of time. Even today, 95% of the speakers of the Romance languages cannot give a satisfactory answer to the "problem" of gender, i.e., why any given noun is feminine and another is masculine. nowadays, one never really considers the ship or the construction beam to be a literal woman. Possibly, especially in the very masculine word of ships and heavy construction, where every person is male, there lies a desire, hidden deep in the subconscious, for some expression of oppositeness. Consider for a moment the world of Chinese philosophy. Most of us have heard of the Ying-Yang principle, the male and female relationship, which so perfectly symbolizes oppositeness. In Greek mythology, the earth was created by the union of two opposites, the male sky and the female earth-water. We now arrive at the crux of our discussion. It is oppositeness, rather than masculinity and femininity, which lies at the basis of

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gender. But to ancient man, what better represented "opposite" than man himself, divided as he is into male and female? So instead of saying "plus" and "minus" to represent oppositeness, as we moderns would say, ancient man probably said "masculine" and "feminine."

With the passage of time, ancient languages reflected the idea that the goddess of the moon was actually the moon, and therefore the moon came to be considered feminine by many cultures. What is the opposite of the moon? The sun, and the sun was considered to be masculine. If we apply this principle to the Romance languages, we find a rich treasure. Nouns which were known to pre-historic civilizations can be analyzed to determine if they fit the pattern. Fire= masculine; its opposite, water = feminine. Earth = feminine, its opposite in the ancient quadrivium of basic elements, air, is masculine. The key is to consider characteristics associated with the object which might elicit a perception of "maleness" or "femaleness." The word "flower" suggests delicacy, grace, beauty, and not surprisingly, is feminine. What is the opposite of flower? Tree. The word "tree" is masculine in the Romance languages. Parts of the human body are especially rich: feminine hand and its opposite, masculine foot; feminine elbow and masculine knee; feminine head and masculine body; masculine arm and feminine leg; masculine eyes and feminine ears; The list goes on and on. Once one knows the form of one half of "a natural pair," it is easy to guess not only

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the other half but also the gender of that half.

Once again, let us remember that this explanation is not propounded as "the truth." Make no mistake about it, it is not perfect. For example, nose is masculine and mouth is feminine in French, but both are feminine in Spanish. In German, the sun is feminine and the moon is masculine. Researchers may be able to determine if in Proto-Germanic mythology, the sun is a goddess and the moon is a god. If not, our theory loses credibility; if so, it gains. No matter. The goal of the paper is to help students see the problem of gender from a new perspective and to gain confidence in their ability to guess the gender of a given noun.

To reinforce the concept that gender in non-English languages is only slightly related to sex, let us call attention to some words which have the opposite gender a native-speaker of English would expect. Then we will try to give an "explanation" for that gender, begging the reader to realize that such an explanation can never be proven to be true or false.

The word "victime" in French (English victim) is always feminine, even when referring to men, possibly because women are seen as victims more often than men; the French word "professeur" (professor in English) is always masculine, even when referring to a female professor, possibly because until recently, only men were professors. "Poeta" and

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"Dentista" even though they end in "a," are masculine, probably because women were never considered as poets or dentists, even though we now have them. Spanish "persona" is always feminine, even when referring to a man, probably simply because the word ends in "a." In German, "madchen" (English "maiden" or "girl") is neuter; a rule states that words ending in "chen" are neuter. Period. No exceptions. Another possible explanation - less satisfying, to be sure, is that a girl or maid was considered to be an "it," just as some adults, nowadays, think of a new-born baby as an "it" rather than a "she" or a "he."

To summarize, the question of gender in non-English Western European languages is only peripherally related to sex. In pre-historic and Ancient times, it probably was indeed related to the sex of some personality, a patron diety. But now it is related, grammatically to the presence or absence of certain letters attached to the end of the noun; in some cases it is related to "oppositeness," for French "main" (hand) does not end in "e" and yet it is feminine, probably because the hand is the opposite of the foot; Spanish "flor" (flower) does not end in "a," but when one speaks of "flowers and trees" in one breath, one feels that there is an inherent opposition, as indeed there is, between the spanish masculine "tree" and the feminine "flower."

It is a very rare student indeed who learns enough of a

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foreign language to be able to handle the question of the gender of a given noun, any given noun. People who have studied the language for years, even decades, sometimes make mistakes of gender. But there is no excuse to make many mistakes. Although the system is complicated, an English speaker can, with practice, acquire some facility in handling gender if he wants to.

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